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### Measuring local autonomy: A decision-making approach

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# Measuring Local Autonomy: A Decision-making Approach

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**ABSTRACT** *In studies on central–local relations it is common to assess local autonomy in a deductive way. The extent of local autonomy is determined by measuring the central legal and financial competence, after which the remaining room for local decision-making is determined. The outcome of this indirect method is that the autonomy of local government tends to be systematically underestimated. As an alternative this paper introduces a decision-making approach in which local decisions are systematically weighed on three dimensions: agenda setting, freedom in choices, and dependency. Using Dutch data, the authors come to the conclusion that a locally oriented perspective leads to a more accurate and positive judgement of the autonomy of local government.*

Central–local relations, or intergovernmental relations, receive unceasing attention from scholars and practitioners, as is evidenced by recent special issues of several journals (Peters & Pierre, 2001; Carmichael & Midwinter, 2002; Agranoff, 2004; Wagenaar & Rutgers, 2004). The same holds true for concepts like decentralisation and local autonomy, since they are key elements in the study of intergovernmental relations.

Typical of many studies in intergovernmental relations is the – as we would call it – deductive approach. In this approach decentralisation and local autonomy are implicitly or explicitly treated as interrelated concepts: the more decentralisation, the larger the local autonomy, and vice versa (see also Fesler, 1965; Rolla, 1998; Fleurke & Willemse, 2004). This assumed correlation is particularly present in studies that deal with divisions of power or competencies between governmental tiers. A second feature of the deductive approach is that indicators of decentralisation are measured at a macro- or national level, from which the extent of local autonomy is subsequently deduced.

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Within this broad approach two sets of indicators can be discerned. Firstly, there are legal indices, like the formal distribution of tasks between governmental tiers, the formal constitutional competencies and protection of local government, the scope of supervision or inspection procedures, or the formal access of local government into central decision-making like legal consultation procedures and the possibility of *cumul des mandats* (Page & Goldsmith, 1987; Page, 1991; Norton, 1991, 1994; Gustaffson, 1991; OECD, 1997; Lijphart, 1999; Loughlin, 2001; EU/Committee of the Regions, 2001; Jourmard & Kongsrud, 2003). If, for example, the prime responsibility of most government functions and services have been designated to central government, or if local government does not possess a constitutionally granted autonomy and the possibility to appeal to the court in case of a central intrusion of its autonomy, the administrative system is centralised and the autonomy of local government small.

A second type of indicators concerns the financial and economical aspects, for example the relative amount of revenues raised by central or local government, used by Lijphart in 1984. Using this indicator one might say that a system is more centralised if central government raises relatively more revenues than local government. Consequently, local power and autonomy will be small. The relative amount of local government in the total government expenditure is another indicator (Sharpe, 1988). The higher this is, the more decentralised a system is.

We question whether the deductive approach and its indicators are adequate for a careful assessment of local autonomy. Several authors have pointed out the difficulties of measuring decentralisation and autonomy (notably Smith, 1979; 1985; Wolman, 1990). Central rules might frequently be used selectively by local governments, as they do not always fit the problem situation. In other cases central rules are only used as conflict-solving mechanisms. The extent to which central supervision actually affects the behaviour of local governments depends on the scope of inspection procedures, available sanctions, the competences of the involved administrators, and other variables. In general, legal indices generate information about the potency of instruments of central government, rather than give a clear insight into the actual autonomy of local government. Also, indicators concerning the financial and economical aspects of intergovernmental relations are not suited to assess local autonomy, because financial central-local relations are characterised by all kinds of specific grants, limits to expenditures, rate capping, etc. (compare Blair, 1991). Moreover, the relative local amount of total government expenditure fails to provide data on the discretion of spending. Additionally, a relatively small capacity for raising own revenues does not exclude the possibility that most of the municipal income consists of a general, non-earmarked grant. In that respect, these macro-indicators at best offer a partial picture of autonomy (compare Agranoff, 2004).

A more accurate assessment of local autonomy can be made, leaving macro-indicators aside, by centring the analysis on local administrative practice, which is subsequently related to the activities of other authorities. In this case, a definition of local autonomy will not point to all kinds of formal and legal constellations like the distribution of decision-making competencies, financial relations, inspection regimes (see e.g. the multi-dimensional definition of autonomy given by Verhoest *et al.*, 2004), but to what local government actually does and does not do.

In this article we will develop an alternative method in which local autonomy is measured in a direct way. This method will subsequently be applied to data on Dutch local government. To summarise, the following questions will be answered in this paper:

1. How can local autonomy be measured, if the local decision-making practice is taken as object of analysis?
2. To what extent do the resulting conclusions on Dutch local autonomy differ from the ones drawn based on the deductive approach?

### The Dutch Case

Before we proceed with presenting our alternative perspective, a few remarks about Dutch local government. Basically the formal position of Dutch local government – *de gemeenten* or municipalities – is roughly similar to the German *Gemeinden* and the Scandinavian municipalities. Dutch local government has a general competence and because of that the possibility to adjust its policies to changing circumstances whenever it thinks this necessary.

Dutch municipalities consist of a council – of which the members are directly elected every four years – and a board consisting of mayor and aldermen. This board is responsible for the civil service and can be conceived as the executive branch of the municipality. The board members are accountable to the council members and can be dismissed by them.

In the Dutch debate the approaches of local autonomy are deductive in nature using the aforementioned macro-indices. For example, it has been argued that the formally decentralised unitary state can hardly be called ‘decentralised’ because constitutional law does not contain any guarantee against the enduring central limitations on local discretion (like the possibility to appeal in court). Moreover, in almost every area central government has designed legislation to steer and order local government (Hennekens, 1996; 2000). Hennekens’ conclusion that local government is insubordinate to central government has been grounded in an analysis of formal rules and legislation.

The Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, 1995) and Dölle and Elzinga (1996) came to similar conclusions based on the same indicators. They added that local government has also lost autonomy to

functionally organised single-purpose organisations (like quangos). This judgement was based on the simple observation that the number of these organisations has rapidly increased (also Hagelstein, 1993). Dölle and Elzinga further pointed to the demise of local discretion because of the rigid financial specification of central–local relations, which feature a relatively large amount of earmarked specific grants (around 55 per cent in 1995; only 16 per cent of the municipal income consisted of own revenues; Havermans, 1998).

The historical research of Veldheer (1994) also follows a deductive way of reasoning. He analysed the annual budgets, the council agendas, and the functions in the civil service organisation in two municipalities over a period of 150 years. His main goal was to sketch the development of the local public tasks and to determine whether local government has developed from a municipality in a night watch state (performing mainly police tasks) to a municipality in a welfare state (with an emphasis on social security). He found that Dutch municipalities did indeed roughly undergo these changes. Current activities as indicated by the budgets, council decisions and the civil service organisation, take place in areas where central government has developed a substantial amount of interference and where it has issued a lot of legislation and statutory measures. This brought him to the conclusion that Dutch local government had become nothing more than a will-less tool of central government. He did not, however, research how much discretion every single council decision, budget item or job description entails.

The Dutch case offers a good opportunity to apply our decision-making approach and to assess whether it will lead to different conclusions than the ones that follow a deductive perspective. Will the generally rather negative view on the autonomy of Dutch local government be reproduced or does a more positive judgement emerge? In order to answer this, we will concentrate on the local decision-making process in the period in which Hennekens, Dölle and Elzinga and the other authors mentioned have drawn their conclusions: 1990–95.

## **Analysing Local Decision-making**

### *Conceptualising Autonomous Decision-making*

How can the autonomy of local government be measured? As explained in the introduction, our starting-point is not national regulations or financial ratios, but the local government's actual decision-making practice. More concretely, in order to obtain a satisfactory view of the functioning of local government with respect to other levels of government, it is necessary to identify all the externally-oriented local government decisions and to study their relations to the activities of other government authorities.

We interpret autonomy as a concept with three dimensions:

- the extent to which local government determines its own agenda;
- the extent to which other government authorities give local government freedom of policy-making (policy choices);
- the extent to which local government is dependent on other authorities in its decision-making practices.

A completely autonomous decision is a decision taken independently of other authorities, with a substantial extent of policy freedom and on the board's own initiative. In our definition we do not include formal competencies, or constraints on these competencies like formal rules, procedures, and requirements local government has to comply with (compare Verhoest *et al.*, 2004), since these elements – as we mentioned in the introduction – essentially only give an indication of how autonomous local government *can* be. Formal constraints are only relevant in so far as they actually limit local discretion. For the same reason we do not include elements like the financial and personnel size of a municipality. These are indicators of the size of tasks of a government rather than of its autonomy. Again, if they tell us something about autonomy, it is about potential autonomy (compare Wolman & Goldsmith, 1990; Goldsmith, 1990).

Our definition of autonomy is prompted by the necessity of using a local perspective on actual everyday administrative practice. We can add to this that from a democratic point of view it is important that local government makes its own choices and sets its own agenda. Why else would a citizen bother to turn up for elections? As Goldsmith (1995: 229) has pointed out, if local governments 'do not determine for themselves the mix of local goods and services ... the election of local representatives serves little purpose' (also Hansen & Klausen, 2002).

### *Unit of Analysis*

In our analysis we have confined ourselves to the decisions made by the municipal boards of mayor and aldermen. Though the council members are elected directly, it is widely believed that the Dutch boards are the prime municipal decision bodies (Denters, 1989; Tops & Depla, 1993; Elzinga, 1999). It is there that strategic and operational decision-making takes place and political and bureaucratic spheres of influence converge. Moreover, any issue on the agenda of a council is also discussed and prepared in the board meetings, whereas the reverse is not true. In order to obtain a comprehensive picture of autonomous decision-making, we could not rely on council decisions alone.

Studying the entire process of actual decision-making at the lowest level of the government apparatus meant that the number of case studies had to be limited. Our study took place in 16 municipalities, with populations that

varied from 1,091 to 84,668 inhabitants (the average of all 450 municipalities in the Netherlands is around 35,000). We have addressed the decisions taken by the boards in January, May and September 1993, a year belonging to a period about which Dutch scholars expressed negative views on the autonomy of Dutch local government (see second section). It is not likely that the choice of another year would yield completely different results. Other analyses of decision-making in four municipalities in 1989, 1991 and 1996 did not give inexplicable differences (Willemse, 2004).

In all 16 municipalities, the chief executive officer of the civil service – the secretary of the board meetings – held the opinion that the selected three months were representative for the whole year. In quantitative terms, with this selection we covered approximately 33 per cent of all decisions in 1993 (in August and parts of December and July the board members hardly meet officially). In the end a total of 2,922 externally-oriented decisions were examined. Decisions on the organisation and operation of the local government apparatus itself were not included.

In the analysis we excluded the routine decisions. Routine decisions are those resulting from previous decisions and therefore requiring no new judgements, or are decisions which were taken more or less mechanically, as the procedures and criteria were largely formalised. Examples are individual social security grants, parking permits, small land transactions (if the destination is fixed), building permits (excluding those leading to a change in zoning plans), standard answers to requests of individual citizens, and so on. The first reason to exclude routine decisions is that, although they form the large majority of all the decisions taken in a municipality (compare Page, 2001), this category would obscure the view on autonomy in strategic local decision-making. Democratic legitimacy of local authorities is primarily grounded in the development or change of new policy, and not in the routine performance of daily activities of civil servants, however important the quality of the delivery of public services may be. The second reason to exclude this category is that the proportion of this kind of decisions varied considerably per municipality (ranging from 26 to 64 per cent), due to differences in the delegation and mandate regulations in force. Because these coincidental differences undermine the comparability of the results per municipality we omitted the routine decisions from the rest of the analysis.

In order to obtain comparable results it was also necessary to clear the records from double counts. In some municipalities an issue was set on the agenda as a board decision and a few weeks later the same issue was introduced as a proposal from the board to the council. Also, sometimes a decision was split into several sub-decisions (a decision to render a conditional grant, to actually pay, to amend the budget, to ask for account, to judge the account, etc.), whereas in other municipalities only the first or most far reaching decision was placed on the agenda. Naturally, we choose to score the respective issue or set of decisions just one time. In the end the total number of decisions was reduced from 2,922 to 1,722.



*Elaboration on the Concept of Autonomy*

How can we ascertain whether autonomy is limited, and – if relevant – which government authorities have imposed the limitation? We identified the following authorities: central government, the province, regional boards, other municipalities and quangos. Under the latter we subsume all special-purpose organisations that perform a public task (schools, hospitals, welfare organisations, public transport companies, and the like). As said, we distinguish three dimensions of autonomy.

*1. Initiative.* To assess who takes the initiative for a certain decision, we look for a rule, law, demand, request, obligation or cause to which this decision can be traced back. The actor who has issued the law, posed the demand, etc., is the one who provoked the local decision. When no external influence or incentive from another actor can be detected, the decision is considered to have been taken on the board's own initiative. Therefore this dimension is spread dichotomously. An example of a board decision put on the agenda by central government is a municipal plan to combat illiteracy among immigrants. In this case the plan had to be developed in order to be eligible for a specific grant. This grant is the financial impetus that has provoked the local decision. Other examples are changes in zoning plans because of a formal instruction to keep in line with national physical planning, the organisation of a petition among municipalities against centrally planned cuts in the general grants, and an adjustment of the opening hours of shops because of a change in the relevant national law. Examples of decisions placed on the agenda by quangos are a request for cooperation in the realisation of social housing projects, a request for subsidy by a social welfare organisation, and a request by a school for extra support in the maintenance of buildings and class rooms.

*2. Freedom of choice.* The extent to which other government authorities give the board freedom in policy-making is dependent on whether the board has the possibility to decide between at least two alternatives with substantially different effects. If so, then the decision has been taken with freedom of choice. Examples are zoning plans (destinations of land and buildings are not prescribed), the rendering of a subsidy to community work (where restrictive rules are usually set by the boards themselves), and the opening up of a new suburb (the location of the road is not necessarily predetermined). An example of a decision without freedom of choice is a request by a school for maintenance funding. Dutch education laws and rules are so detailed in their prescriptions that a local board does not have a realistic option to refuse the request. Another example is a decision to clear unexploded aircraft bombs from the Second World War. In this specific case there is no explicit demand from central government to clear the bomb – the municipality is the first to be informed and it starts a clearance procedure

independently – but central and provincial government would not allow the board to do nothing. Clearing is the only option.

*3. Dependency.* Dependency of boards on other actors can take different forms, like the need for information, money, personnel, ground, and permission. A decision scores as dependent when the decision cannot be realised without the cooperation of another actor. In the case of physical planning many decisions (like changes in zoning plans) are subject to formal provincial scrutiny, but usually this procedure is a matter of provincial routine. In our analysis decisions formally under supervision of higher authorities have only been scored dependent if there was more than just a formal notification, as evidenced by provincial inspection reports and the possible approval, veto or suspension. Other examples of dependent decisions are a plan to realise housing for the elderly (the exploitation and perhaps even realisation needs to be done by a housing corporation), a plan to prevent school dropout (schools are required to implement the policy), and the decision to fill a ditch or canal (a water board may need to provide technical information on the consequences on the ground water level).

After having coded each decision on each of the three dimensions, an aggregate autonomy score was calculated. The autonomy score per board is the percentage of completely autonomous decisions, that is of the decisions that have been taken autonomously on all three dimensions. In short, in order to signify a decision as taken autonomously, we have used the strictest criterion.

We also researched whether the autonomy differs between policy areas. Therefore, for each decision we determined to which policy area it mainly pertained. We identified the following areas: (1) physical planning and land affairs (PP&LA), (2) public housing and building control (PH&BC), (3) public welfare and recreation (PW&R), (4) traffic and transport (T&T), (5) environment and sanitation (E&S), (6) economic affairs, (7) public order and safety (PO&S), (8) social affairs, (9) tourism, (10) cultural affairs, (11) sports, (12) education, (13) public health, and (14) water works. Then, we calculated the autonomy scores in each area.

### *Methods of Data Collection*

Two methods of data collection have been employed. First of all, the data were collected by means of study of the weekly issued lists of board decisions and minutes of board meetings. If necessary, documents underlying the studied decisions were also consulted. These documents or files often consisted of relevant rules and legislation, minutes of internal deliberations and external consultations, research reports, informal and formal correspondence and so on. In about two-thirds of the cases the study of these files was necessary.

Secondly, interviews were conducted as a supportive reference. In these interviews with senior officials we deliberately did not ask for overall perceptions of local autonomy, since these might be biased by feelings of frustration or deprivation caused by central government. We distanced ourselves as much as possible from the wisdom of the day. The function of the interviews was fact-finding. By checking every separate score we could verify whether our reconstruction of the coming about of a certain decision was an accurate reflection of how it actually went. In case other deviating information came to light, for example on the decisive role a certain actor has played, we needed to find indications for this in the files.

The analysis of so many decisions with the methods just described will seem sheer drudgery. In reality the research in each municipality took around eight workdays. The analysis of the decisions was helped very much by the fact that local civil servants register a lot and keep a lot of documents, often even telephone notes. Also, individual municipal decisions generally are not so complex that they are difficult to fathom. This has contributed to the pace of the research.

A possible objection against our method is that it does not take into account informal influence because this will not be committed to paper. Though we cannot exclude the possibility that we have incorrectly scored decisions as taken autonomously, we are not convinced that this measurement error distorts the results. Firstly, if another actor has indeed played a *decisive* role, than at least the files should somewhere mention this and offer an indication of the actor's influence. Secondly, as said before, the municipal archives are very voluminous and much of the municipal work is registered and documented. This holds for informal contacts as well, since we also found telephone notes in the archives. Where we nonetheless suspected that the archive concerned lacked important information or indications of informal influence of other actors, we checked this with the interviewees and processed the answers in our data set.

### Autonomy of Municipal Boards

Boards operate relatively autonomously (see Table 1). In most municipalities more than half of the decisions satisfy the three requirements for

**Table 1.** Autonomy of local boards, expressed in percentages of all decisions

	Decisions	Decisions, disregarding quangos
Taken on own initiative	63.8	75.3
Independent	75.9	83.3
Freedom in choices	97.6	97.6
Aggregated autonomy score	52.2	70.3
N	1722	1326

autonomy: they were taken at the board's own initiative, independently and with substantial policy freedom. The average autonomy score is 52.2 per cent. If we disregard quangos and limit our analysis to central government, the province, the region and other municipalities, we find that the average score rises to 70.3 per cent.

Table 2 shows that quangos impose most of the restrictions on the autonomy of boards: 47.3 per cent of the non-autonomous decisions required some form of coordination with one or more of these bodies. Differences between municipalities are to be seen mainly in their relations with central and regional authorities. Some municipalities are more affected by central government influence, others by regional authorities. Provincial governments do not play an important role in the board's decision-making in any of the municipalities.

On which areas have the boards taken their decisions? In Table 3 the percentages of the decisions taken in each area are given. Setting ten per cent

**Table 2.** Influence of other authorities on local boards, expressed in percentages of all non-autonomous decisions (N = 840), and in numbers of municipalities with more than 30 per cent non-autonomous decisions

	Influence of other authorities	Number of municipalities > 30%
Central government	24.5	2
Province	12.3	0
Region, other municipalities	28.7	5
Quangos	47.3	16

**Table 3.** Importance of policy areas, expressed in percentages of decisions taken in the respective areas (N = 1722), and number of municipalities with more than 10 per cent decisions in the respective area; average autonomy in most important areas (N = 1240), and (relative) number of municipalities with more than 52.2 per cent autonomous decisions in the respective areas

Area	Decisions	Municipalities > 10 per cent	Average autonomy	Municipalities, > 52.2 per cent
PP&LA	17.5	15	72.6	14 (out of 15)
PH&BC	12.7	14	55.9	10 (out of 14)
PW&R	13.0	13	48.9	5 (out of 13)
T&T	9.0	5	55.5	4 (out of 5)
E&S	9.2	8	54.8	5 (out of 8)
Economic affairs	8.4	5	65.8	5 (out of 5)
PO&S	3.9	0	—	—
Social affairs	2.3	0	—	—
Tourism	2.2	1	38.5	0 (out of 1)
Cultural affairs	5.8	0	—	—
Sports	2.6	0	—	—
Education	4.4	0	—	—
Public health	1.5	0	—	—
Water works	1.1	0	—	—

*Note:* See previous section for the abbreviations of areas.

as the limit, in nearly every municipality many decisions have been taken in the areas of physical planning, public housing, and public welfare. In the areas of traffic and transport, environment and economic affairs, the situation varies per municipality: some pay much attention to it, some do not. In the remaining areas the boards generally take only a few decisions, with the exception of tourism in the island of Vlieland. As may also be noted, in the most important areas autonomy is generally above average (except for public welfare and tourism), especially in the area of physical planning. Particularly in public welfare and environment and sanitation the autonomy scores differ remarkably between municipalities.

Though in quantitative terms municipal boards enjoy a substantial amount of autonomy, two issues need to be addressed. First, one can argue that the autonomy should not concern trivial issues but that it should relate to topics that really matter. Secondly, autonomy also means that there are no barriers preventing local government from making decisions it had willing to make: the question of so-called non-decisions.

### *Importance of the Decisions*

An assessment of the importance of decisions is an empirically difficult and above all rather arbitrary exercise. As Page (2001: 36) has noted in an analysis of British secondary legislation, 'importance neither reflects the number of people affected' (this would imply that a municipal decision to establish a school is less important than a decision to place traffic lights on a busy crossing), 'nor the amount of money involved in its application' (this would imply that a local decision to place camera surveillance in unsafe areas is less important than the annual inflation correction of local tax rates). Furthermore, to citizens a decision to place lighting in a pedestrian tunnel might be much more important than a long-term policy plan on the socio-economic restructuring of the municipality.

The assessment of how important decisions are is very much a normative question and depends on what local government ought to be and ought to do. Though our method in itself does not exclude the application of such criteria to each decision, we choose to evaluate our scores more objectively by looking at two characteristics of the decisions.

First, we determined whether a decision relates to more than one area (whether it requires *policy integration*). An example of a decision concerning only one area is a subsidy to a football club (only sports). An example of a decision requiring policy integration is a plan to renovate a certain part of a historical inner city by attracting new pubs and shops and the removal of decayed houses (it relates to tourism, economic affairs, housing, and physical planning).

Secondly, we ascertained whether a decision held consequences for future decision-making. An example is the annual budget, which largely predetermines how money will be spent in the coming year. Another

example is a zoning plan which contains rules that are being used in the judgement of future building requests. A decision not setting parameters for future decision-making is, for example, the acquisition of ground for the realisation of a kindergarten.

If the number of decisions requiring policy integration and decisions setting parameters are well represented in the category autonomous decisions, then we can maintain our conclusion that municipal boards operate relatively autonomously.

To what extent do the (non)autonomous decisions require policy integration? Of the total of 1,722 issues to be decided on, 976 (57 per cent) require policy integration, because they were related to more than one field. Table 4 shows that 43 per cent of the decisions not requiring policy integration has been taken autonomously. But more importantly, of the decisions that *do* require policy integration, a majority has been taken autonomously (59 per cent). Thus, though the correlation is small ( $\phi = .14$ ), a decision requiring policy integration is more likely to have been taken autonomously than a decision not requiring policy integration. This means we can maintain our conclusion that boards operate with a substantial autonomy.

Table 5 shows that municipal boards take more decisions which do not set parameters for future decision-making (isolated decisions) than decisions which hold consequences for future decision-making (214 out of 1,722, 12.4 per cent). This is understandable since these last decisions set standards for many other decisions yet to come. Almost half of the decisions setting parameters for future decision-making have been taken

**Table 4.** Percentages of decisions (not) requiring policy integration that have been taken non-autonomously and autonomously (N = 1722)

	Not requiring policy integration	Requiring policy integration
Non-autonomous	56.8	40.9
Autonomous	43.2	59.1
Total	100.0	100.0
N	746	976

Phi = 0.14; p = 0.00.

**Table 5.** Percentages of decisions (not) setting parameters for future decision-making that have been taken non-autonomously and autonomously (N = 1722)

	Not setting parameters	Setting parameters
Non-autonomous	46.5	54.5
Autonomous	53.9	45.5
Total	100.1	100.0
N	1508	214

Phi = 0.05; p = 0.04.

autonomously (45 per cent). In the category of isolated decisions 55 per cent have been taken autonomously. It appears that decisions affecting future decision-making are more often influenced by other authorities than more immediate short-term decisions. This correlation indeed is significant ( $p=0.04$ ;  $\alpha=0.05$ ), but nonetheless negligibly small ( $\phi=0.05$ ). We can reasonably say that the decisions which are setting parameters for future decision-making are well represented in the autonomous decisions of municipal boards.

### *The Question of Non-decisions*

A second objection against our method might be that it focuses on actually made decisions and ignores the possibility of non-decisions. The importance of the latter, however, is widely acknowledged. Scholars point out that the autonomy of local government may not only be restricted by the direct influence of higher authorities and other organisations, but also by specific circumstances like a weak tax base, scarce physical resources or insufficient economies of scale (Gurr & King, 1987: 43–73; King & Pierre, 1990: 9–12; Hudson, 1993). Such external factors may form an obstacle for local government to actually carry out certain initiatives that are nevertheless considered necessary.

It is argued that non-decisions are very hard to detect as they are not explicitly documented (Page, 2001), but this does not mean that they are totally invisible (compare Polsby, 1979). To check the results of our study for non-decisions, we selected four municipalities out of our sample for in-depth research: the historical city of Gouda (pop. 72,000), the old mining town of Kerkrade (pop. 51,000), the newly – in 1972 – established municipality of Dronten, situated on reclaimed land (pop. 35,500) and the commuter town of IJsselstein (pop. 32,000). The first two municipalities are urban towns with relatively poor populations and scarce physical resources. The other two have relatively small populations and the corresponding low budgets might have prevented the municipal boards taking the necessary initiatives.

In these four municipalities we carried out a qualitative study into all reports of the council meetings, in particular into debates on the annual budget. These documents are the most appropriate ones for detecting non-decisions, as (unattainable) policy desires are most likely expressed in this municipal political body. Moreover, the minutes of council meetings are a complete literal rendering of the debate. Additionally, all sorts of general policy documents like long-range plans and annual accounts were studied. In order to increase the chance to detect non-decisions – and thereby maximise the possibility to reject our results – the minutes and other archives for the period 1990–95 were examined closely.

When can we speak of a non-decision? First of all it is a policy desire that cannot be fulfilled and is consequently not decided upon. Yet we should be

aware that councillors will always have certain policy wishes that cannot be executed, no matter how many physical or financial resources their municipality has. Councillors may also be swayed by the issues of the day or they may put forward obviously unrealistic and strongly politically coloured demands. In order to prevent arbitrary judgements in the assessment of whether there is a non-decision, we have formulated the following additional criteria. The policy desire is:

- broadly supported, i.e. by both board and council members;
- frequently expressed in at least two consecutive years.

We have not found non-decisions in the period 1990–95. Yet, to test whether our method is sensitive enough, we applied the method also to the period 1960–90. In this period we detected some non-decisions in two of the four aforementioned municipalities.

In the beginning of the 1960s the council and board members of Gouda complained about chronic lack of building land, there being a persistent and severe housing shortage and an urgent need for renewal of the old city centre. Only after an adjustment of the municipal borders in 1964 – made possible by an Act of Parliament – by which the Gouda territory almost doubled, did these complaints fade away. Our observation that this is a case of non-decision is supported by the results of the quantitative analysis. Before the adjustment of the municipal borders the boards took relatively few decisions (45 versus around 100 in later years) and relatively few were taken on the boards' own initiative (45 versus 60 per cent in later years). After the adjustment of the municipal borders the boards' attention to physical planning and public housing doubled (from 11 per cent in 1963 to 20 per cent in 1968) and the amount of autonomous decisions rose to the average level.

In the former mining town of Kerkrade a severe economic crisis came about after the closure of the mines. This closure was ordered by central government in the late 1960s. In the council meetings the crisis led to persistent tirades against central government. It was held responsible for all economic problems and for local impotence in coping with the regional crisis, which would last until the late 1980s. This impotence is reflected in the board's agenda. The percentage of decisions aimed at improving the economic state of affairs has generally been less than ten per cent, even in the early 1970s when population figures dropped and unemployment figures rose 20 per cent in five years. On the other hand, and despite lamentations in the council, there was growing awareness that Kerkrade would never be able to solve the regional problems by itself. Local authorities reconciled themselves more or less to the idea that their municipality was just too small to solve the problem. Therefore they accepted that central, provincial and functional authorities (like the Chamber of Commerce and development banks) took the main responsibility for tackling the problems. They were best equipped to transform the economic structure in the Kerkrade region.



Our conclusion is that our method to find non-decisions is sufficiently sensitive to detect them had they occurred in the period 1990–95. Based on this we feel safe in assuming that the possibility of non-decisions does not force us to revise our earlier findings.

## **To Conclude**

In studies of intergovernmental relations, (de)centralisation and local autonomy many scholars follow a deductive approach. Typical of these studies is that indicators at the national or macro level are used to deduce the extent of local autonomy. In the case of the Netherlands this has resulted in a generally very negative view on the extent local government enjoys autonomy. Some scholars even judged that local autonomy has completely waned.

Alternatively, in this paper we developed a method for studying local autonomy by taking as the object of analysis local decision-making practice, relating this to the activities of other governmental and non-governmental actors. We implemented this method through a quantitative content analysis of decisions of municipal boards, complemented with supportive interviews. As far as the period 1990–95 is concerned our decision-making approach yields much less negative conclusions than the ones drawn by those who have taken a deductive approach. In general, around half of the municipal decisions have been taken autonomously; that is, the municipal board has taken the decision on its own initiative (and was not forced by other governments), with freedom of choice, and without the necessity for cooperation of other governmental actors. This conclusion could be maintained after studying the possibility of the presence of non-decisions, and the possibility that autonomous decisions are mainly less important decisions.

Although in general the autonomy in the 16 municipalities studied is larger than one might expect when adhering to the deductive perspective, we have noted differences between municipalities. Also, municipalities vary with respect to the policy areas they are mainly engaged in. These differences can be explained by the fact that the priorities of municipalities differ, depending on the specific economical, demographical, social or physical situation of the community in question.

To what extent can our decision-making method be applied elsewhere and will it lead to similar results? Regarding methodology, we see one obvious reason why it cannot be applied in other contexts, and that is the unavailability of a written archive in which decisions of the main municipal body – be it a board, a council, a mayor or a combination – have been recorded. From a theoretical point of view, application of our method might yield the same results in those administrative systems where according to the deductive approach local autonomy is small; that is, in unitary states as the Netherlands. On the other hand, application of our method in federal systems might not lead to the detection of more autonomy, as according to a

deductive perspective sub-national authorities already enjoy a fair degree of autonomy. Probably this particularly holds for the relation between the federal level and the tier directly beneath. Application of our method within the states of a federal system might still detect a greater autonomy of municipalities towards e.g. German *Länder*, Swiss *Kantons*, Belgian *gewesten*, or American states, than one would expect using a deductive approach.

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